



MULINO DI FIRENZE  
HOTEL

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## OUR HISTORY

If the Mulino di Firenze hotel presents unusual architectural features such as basins, storehouses, pipes for taking water from one tank to another and granaries, and some examples of industrial archaeology, such as unusually shaped cast iron elements, grindstones and a waterwheel, it is because for the most part of its seven-hundred-year-old history this structure was a watermill.

Nor was it the only one on this stretch of the Arno: beginning in the Middle Ages many similar structures, the “food manufacturers” of the time, were found along the river that runs through Florence. In the same way that raw materials are taken to factories to be transformed to produce the packaged food we find in the supermarket, back then farmers used to give their harvested grain to the mills. The miller ground it, not using electricity, but the force of the river water which flowed through the waterwheels, turning the grindstones attached to them inside the building. The grain was poured slowly between the millstones, whose constant rotating movement crushed it to produce the flour that the local people then used to make their bread. The mills were therefore a fundamental part of the Florentine landscape because they provided one of the main ingredients in the people’s daily diet.

The “Rovezzano” weir – named after its location – that can still be seen opposite the Mulino has existed since the Middle Ages. The weirs were generally built of wood and located close to the mills, because they were needed to deviate part of the river water towards the waterwheels. So even in periods when the Arno was running lower, the watermills could receive enough water to work all the same. At times, like in our case, the weirs could cause disputes: since there was another mill on the other side of the Arno, the owners of the two premises had to agree on the height of the weir so that it could direct enough water to both, something that was not always easy to work out. So it was that in the eighteenth century, when called upon to decide the situation of the weirs, the Grand Duke of Tuscany’s architects ended up having to resolve numerous disputes between the monks from the Badia Fiorentina, the owners of our Mulino, and Cavalier Giovanni Alessandri, the owner of the mill on the opposite bank.

The origins of the Mulino date from several centuries earlier: the first documented news dates from around 1350, when the premises belonged to the Albizi family, rich wool merchants who covered a great deal of important roles in the Florentine government. In 1372 a family rift ensued, the reasons for which are unfortunately unknown. The result was that the brothers Alessandro and Niccolao Albizi asked the rulers of Florence to ratify the detachment from their family, so that they could change their surname and coat of arms, and obtain the authorization to call themselves Alessandri. This was the name that the two also gave to the mills on the other side of the river, which as we have seen came down to their heirs in the eighteenth century, the ones involved in the disputes over the height of the Rovezzano weir.

In the meantime, however, our Mulino was touched on by some important events: 1420 marked the start of the work in Florence to erect the dome of Santa Maria del Fiore, directed by Filippo Brunelleschi, and there was a sharp increase in the request for timber. The simplest way for it to arrive in the city was to cut it in the Arezzo hills and exploit the Arno current to transport it towards Florence. The trunks, up to 25 metres (80 feet) long, were tied together using ropes, forming rafts known as “foderi”. The “foderatori” were the hard-grafting men who floated these rafts along the river course. There were two men per raft, one at the front and one at the back, standing or crouching on the trunks which they skilfully guided using long poles. When they arrived close to the city, however, they found themselves faced with the weirs, which completely barred their way. To enable the “foderi” to go past them and continue on their way towards Florence, the mills situated next to the weirs, like ours, therefore had to make openings called “porte foderarie” or “foderaini”. So it was that for years and years the Mulino witnessed the timber go past that was needed for the scaffolding of Brunelleschi’s dome, a highly ambitious project given the means available at the time, and the biggest brickwork dome ever built, covered inside, what is more, by the largest known fresco in the world, with a surface area of no less than 3,600 m<sup>2</sup>. These rafts would continue to navigate the Arno until 1706 when, according to an official document, some of the “foderaini” passes were closed.

Meanwhile, in 1493, the Mulino changed owners, passing from the Albizi family to the friars of the Badia Fiorentina, who paid 700 gold scudi for it. But more important than the change of hands was the fact that in the same years the premises and the weir were studied by Renaissance genius Leonardo da Vinci. The floods caused by the Arno had been particularly violent in that period, and in 1498 the city’s governors commissioned the artist/scientist to make an in-depth investigation of the stretch of river prior to the city, in order to limit flooding and save Florence from its disastrous effects. Leonardo thoroughly inspected the riversides, drawing up numerous maps with the exact measurements of banks, weirs and lands, also including our Mulino, which he called molino di badja. In the same period he designed excavating machines and other tools to intervene on the river course, but, despite his genius, the technical means of the period were too limited for such an immense goal, and the Arno continued to flow within its natural bounds, overflowing the banks from time to time – in both 1547 and 1557 in the sixteenth century alone – to devastating effect.

Even though Leonardo’s research did not achieve what it set out for, the Mulino nevertheless was able to benefit from other scientific innovations: in 1868 it was extended to produce not just cereal, as it always had done, but also olive pomace oil. Pomace is the material leftover after crushing the olives, which still contains a small quantity of oil (from 3 to 6%). Until then, these residues had been used to fertilize the ground, but in the nineteenth century it was discovered that it was possible to extract the residual oil. It was a businessman from Puglia, Vito Cesare Boccardi, during a trip to Germany, who noticed that some factories there used a chemical substance, carbon disulphide, to extract the fatty material from bones. Thus he had the idea of bringing it to Italy and using it to do the same with another fatty substance, the oil contained in olive residues. And so it was that the Mulino was one of the first plants in Italy to fully exploit this scientific discovery to produce pomace oil. This oil was not suited for consumption owing to the toxicity of the disulphide, and therefore it was used to produce highly valued soaps, because they were fatty and therefore softer than the others. And not just in Italy, but also abroad: in 1898 a soap manufacturer’s from Milwaukee, founded in 1864 by B.J. Johnson, gave the name “Palmolive” to its characteristic green soap, produced from this Italian oil.

And after the introduction of carbon disulphide, the winds of change continued to blow over the Mulino in the years to come: at the end of the nineteenth century it was one of the first mills in Europe to use a special hydraulic mechanism devised by Swiss designer Gustav Daverio. It took over two years of non-stop work to complete, but the result was worth all the effort: the machine lifted or lowered the axis of the large hydraulic wheel depending on the quantity of water present in the river, so that the mill could still grind even when the quantity of water in the river was very low and other plants were obliged to stay still. The new system proved to be so revolutionary that, as often happens with technological innovations, it was bitterly opposed by the workers because they feared that the machine would make them lose their jobs. In reality, that was not the case, and families of millers continued to run the Mulino until the 1960s.

As we have seen, the in-depth studies performed by Leonardo had not managed to find a solution to the problem of the Arno’s floods, and from time to time, during periods of intense rainfall, it continued to overflow, destroying everything that it found in its path and changing the face of the city. It was in 1966, when the Mulino was still operational, that the last great flood took place: in the early hours of 4 November, the Arno broke its banks and rushed violently into the Florentine countryside and the historic town centre, destroying paintings by past masters, ancient books in the National Library and a large number of artworks, and seriously damaging historic houses and palazzi. The Mulino was also struck by the violence of the waters, which reached a level of 2.10 metres (seven feet) inside. When the river died down, the millers abandoned the destroyed building never to return.

It was perhaps inspired by the desolation of the place that a few years later, in 1971, the poet Eugenio Montale (who would win the Nobel prize for literature in 1975) composed a piece entitled The Arno at Rovezzano. His observation of the river close to the ruins of the Mulino caused him to reflect on the topic of time, in these verses represented by the water which flows relentlessly, regardless of human beings and their woes:

*Great rivers are the images of time,  
cruel and impersonal. Viewed from a bridge  
they declare their inexorable nullity.  
Only the hesitant bend of some swampy  
reed-bed, some mirror  
that shines between crowded brush and moss  
can reveal that the water, like us, thinks about itself  
before becoming whirling and destructive.  
In 2003 the Mulino was bought by the Lotti*

In 2003 the Mulino was bought by the Lotti family, who saved it from abandonment and restored the building while preserving its elements of early industrial architecture. So, with its basins, pipes to take the water from one tank to another, grindstones and waterwheel, its working past has not been forgotten, while at the same time being modernized with all the latest comforts. Inaugurated on 15 September 2010, today the Mulino di Firenze is a renowned luxury hotel with views over the Arno, situated against the backdrop of the green Tuscan countryside, just five kilometres (three miles) from the centre of one of the best-loved cities in the world.